

10-1989

The Warp and the Weft: An Overview of the Social Fabric of Mexican Texas

Felix D. Almaraz

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Almaraz, Felix D. (1989) "The Warp and the Weft: An Overview of the Social Fabric of Mexican Texas," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 27: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol27/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

THE WARP AND THE WEFT: AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL FABRIC OF MEXICAN TEXAS

by Felix D. Almaraz

Between 1821 and 1836, the social fabric of Texas consisted of Spanish warp threads and Mexican weft filaments. Mother Spain, beginning in the late seventeenth century and continuing throughout the eighteenth century, lined the warp fibers through exploration, missionization, and colonization. In the early nineteenth century, Father Mexico, reinforcing the Hispanic heritage, intertwined the warp threads with intensive colonization and settlement. The result was a refined texture of color and variation.

Spain's legacy in Texas is highly visible in terms of place-name geography. Every important river, from the Rio Sabinas on the east to the Rio Grande on the west, bears an Hispanic name. Equally noticeable are the towns. Listed on the official Texas Highway Map are 289 communities with Spanish names, complemented by fifteen per cent of the counties, or forty out of 254.¹ Whereas Spain's contributions to place-name geography are recognized, Mexico's participation in the historical saga requires amplification.

The State of Texas honored a border captain of the 1820s by naming a county in his memory. Along the two *orillas* (banks) of the Rio Grande, Antonio Zapata earned respect and fame as an Indian fighter. The Comanches against whom he fought called him *Sombrero de Manteca* because his hat usually shined "from the perspiration and oil of the colonel's hair, intermingled with dust and lime from caliche which settled upon it."²

The Zapata story vitiates the myth that Spanish-speaking pioneers lacked courage, initiative, and principle. Zapata came from humble origins in Guerrero, Tamaulipas. He began as a herdsman of goats, and gradually expanded operations to include merchandizing and real estate. It was, however, his prowess as an Indian fighter that gave to him stature as a regional leader. In the war for Texan Independence he served on the side of Santa Anna because he believed that the Mexican government's policies took precedence over sectional interests. Later Zapata withdrew his support and opposed Santa Anna's centralist tendencies on the battlefield. In 1840, Colon Antonio Zapata paid the supreme sacrifice for his Federalists principles.³

Another Mexican frontier captain, whose achievements in the cause of Texan independence constitute the oral and written tradition of Victoria, was Captain Placido Benavides, son-in-law of colonizer Martin de Leon. In a more peaceful decade of the 1820s, de Leon and his sons, along with Placido Benavides, selected ranch lands in the Guadalupe River Valley

near the coast. As an indication of how the Mexican period interlocked with the Spanish past, the topographical features of the coastal area had been named by earlier Hispanic travelers and settlers. Martín de León, his sons Fernando and Agapito, and Benavides picked choice lands through which flowed two creeks — the Arenosa and the Zorillo. The Arenosa, appropriately named because of its sandy bottom, was acceptable to the Mexican Texan pioneers. The Arroyo del Zorillo, however, was another matter. Notwithstanding ethnic background, there was nothing inspiring, either to the heart or to the nostril, about a creek named in commemoration of a skunk. Benavides promptly changed the name to Arroyo de Plácido. Regrettably, Anglo Texan colonists of a latter period modified the spelling and pronunciation of the creek to Placedo.⁴

The feastday of San Patricio means as much to Mexican Texans as it does to the Irish. The cultural ties between Spain and Ireland are illustrated by the travels in the borderlands of Alejandro O'Reiley, Hugo Oconor, and Pedro Alonso O'Crouley. Of the three, only Oconor has a direct association with eighteenth-century Spanish Texas. All the same in the succeeding period, the cultural affinity of the Spanish-speaking people for the Irish continued. In 1830, a group of Irish immigrants arrived in the San Patricio colony, located adjacent to the de León grant. The Mexican Texans in the vicinity welcomed their new *vecinos* with a feast. The records do not disclose how the language barrier was surmounted, but probably a commonality of religious convictions, as well as the celebration, established a lasting friendship among the people. So much so, in fact, that the site of the feast became the community of Banquete.⁵

The Irish colonists, unlike others, accepted and respected the contributions to place-name geography of Spanish and Mexican Texas. They settled upon the land, made it productive, and left the names of rivers and creeks unchanged — the Nueces, Aransas, Mision, Saus, Blanco, Medio, Copano, Melon, Sarco, Chiltipin, and Papalote.⁶

Upriver from the de León colony on the bank of the Guadalupe is the town of Gonzales, named in honor of Rafael Gonzales, one-time governor of Coahuila y Texas. Directly west of Gonzales, halfway to San Antonio de Bexar, is the community of Seguin, named after Juan Nepomuceno Seguin, a subordinate of Sam Houston who commanded the Mexican Texan cavalry at San Jacinto. According to British observer William Bollaert, these three centers — San Antonio, Seguin, and Gonzales — formed a geographic triangle of Mexican Texas.⁷ What Bollaert implied was that the three towns represented the Spanish-Mexican cultural axis in which the inhabitants, because of settlement and activity, enjoyed longevity and patrimony. The interaction of the families definitely strengthened the social fabric.

The San Antonio families of Seguin and Gonzales linked the Spanish legacy to the Mexican heritage. The father of Juan Nepomuceno Seguin was Erasmo Seguin, who served honorably in the Spanish bureaucracy

of Texas. Antonio Martinez, the transitional governor from Hispanic control to Mexican rule, wrote of *Don Erasmo*:

Many of the citizens [of San Antonio de Bexar] are honorable, but this characteristic does not enable them to expedite the administration of justice. Also, there are very few skillful writers in this community, and the *alcaldes* explain to me that this scarcity of scribes compels them to rely on the services of *Don Erasmo Seguin* for any necessary writing. He is not only more skillful than anyone else, but ever since my arrival in this province this individual has shown himself to be a respectful citizen of sufficiently peaceful character. . . .⁸

In July, 1821, Erasmo Seguin journeyed to Natchitoches, Louisiana, as an emissary of Governor Martinez, to escort Stephen Fuller Austin and sixteen Anglo American colonists into Texas. Seguin advised Martinez:

I suppose that you will want to entertain him and those who accompany him — all of them, as I am informed, of highly respectable families in the best possible manner. Therefore, I notify you so that you may, if you think it desirable, have suitable lodging prepared for them for the 4 or 5 days they will stay in the capital.⁹

From this initial contact, a mutual friendship developed between Austin and the Seguins. Whenever *Don Estevan*, as the Tejanos called Austin, visited San Antonio, he was a guest in the Seguin home. Stephen's younger brother, James (called Santiago by the Mexican Texans), lived with the Seguin family for approximately a year while he studied Spanish, the language of his adopted country.¹⁰ *Don Estevan* established an important precedent for bilingual-bicultural education when he counselled his brother to learn Spanish:

you should rise at daylight and be at your studies and continue at them all day, only taking exercise and amusement enough to relax the mind . . . you will not have such another opportunity of learn[ing] the language and if you neglect it you will repent it when too late — attend to *writing* it, and in order to learn the spelling as to improve you in the language [oral communication] and in your *hand*, write down a long lesson everyday out of some book and as you write it look for the words you do not understand in the Diccionary [sic], and also attend to the parts of speech . . . If you could translate well and write a good hand I could get a place for you in the Captain Generals [sic] office . . . Speak to the Barron [de Bastrop] and Don Erasmo on the subject — . . .¹¹

The cordial relationship between Austin and Erasmo Seguin extended into political questions. When Mexico gained its independence, Austin supported Seguin's candidacy as the Texan delegate to the national constituent congress. In Mexico City, Seguin advanced the cause of colonization and assisted in drafting the Constitution of 1824.¹²

Seguin's son, Juan Nepomuceno, was a pillar in San Antonio society. A member of another leading family, Jose Maria Rodriguez, recalled that

Colonel Seguin had a fine stone house on Military Plaza . . . After the Battle of San Jacinto, John Seguin was the first mayor of the town.

Sometime between 1829 and 1835 he organized the Mexican rangers and here remained in command until the Mexican troops went out . . .¹³

After the war, Juan Seguin served as senator from the District of Bexar in the third and fourth congresses of the Republic of Texas, from September 1837 to February 1840. In January 1841, he became mayor of San Antonio, an office he held until he resigned in April 1842.¹⁴

Seguin's public service, as well as that of Francisco Ruiz, Jose Antonio Navarro, and Lorenzo de Zavala, indicated that the frontier society of nineteenth century Texas, at least in the first half of the century, was tolerant, open, and pluralistic. The highest recognition of Seguin's contributions came from President Sam Houston, who, in a letter to the Governor of Louisiana, wrote:

Allow me to introduce to your kind civilities and consideration, Col. John N. Seguin, an officer in our service. The Colonel commanded the only Mexican company who fought in the cause of Texas at the Battle of San Jacinto. His chivalrous and estimable conduct in the battle won for him my warmest regard and esteem, . . .¹⁵

Even after Seguin's influence declined in a later decade when intolerant newcomers misinterpreted the colonel's motives, causing him to leave San Antonio, Sam Houston remained steadfast in his friendship and admiration of the Mexican Texan. *Don* Erasmo received the following message from Houston:

I am aware that you are unhappy in consequence of the absence of your son, . . . from Bexar . . . what his motives are for absenting himself from home at this time, I cannot imagine, but you may be assured, my dear sir, and you may so assure him, that I cannot, nor will I ever entertain a suspicion of his fidelity to the Republic of Texas; . . .

The conduct of Captain Seguin and his brave company in the army of 1836, and his brave and gallant bearing in the battle of San Jacinto, with that of his men — soldierly and officer-like conduct as Colonel in the service of the nation, have afforded me too much happiness to sacrifice my estimation of his worth and character to idle rumor, or unexplained circumstances.

Allow me to render to you my sincere expressions of friendship, and tender you my salutations of profound esteem and regard to your family.¹⁶

Equally important, though not in the same vein as the accomplishments of the Seguin family, were the deeds of Rafael Gonzales, for whom was named the town of Gonzales in 1825. Rafael Gonzales, born in 1789, was a resident of San Antonio de Bexar. After entering military service in the presidial company of Nuestra Senora de Loreto, he transferred to the presidio of Monclova. By 1818 Gonzales had risen to the grade of captain. Three years later he switched allegiance, supported the movement for Mexican independence, and became a lieutenant colonel. From August 1824 to March 1826, Gonzales was governor of the duo-state of Coahuila y Texas. Finally, in 1834, on the eve of the Texan revolution, *Don* Rafael received appointment as secretary of the military

comandacia of Coahuila and Texas. It was appropriate, therefore, when Anglo colonists with Green De Witt, a contemporary of Stephen F. Austin, settled in the upper Guadalupe River area, that they should pay respect to the incumbent governor by naming the principal town in his honor.¹⁷ The immigrants and old-line settlers of the 1830s were God-fearing, law-abiding, productive individuals who earnestly tried to adjust to the socio-political realities of frontier Texas.

Often it was difficult to reconcile lofty ideals with harsh conditions and limited resources. Education was a problem faced by every succeeding provincial administration in Texas from Spanish times to the Mexican period. As late as 1807, Spanish officials had been unable to implement a school system at all mission pueblos, as prescribed by royal decrees of 1770, 1772, and 1774.¹⁸ In spite of earlier setbacks, in 1811, during the throes of the Hidalgo revolt, Hispanic residents of San Antonio, under the leadership of Subdeacon Juan Manuel Zambrano, authorized the construction of a schoolhouse. Although the governing *junta* donated 850 pesos for the project, the sum was insufficient to cover all expenditures. All the same, two leading *vecinos* — Erasmo Seguin and Jose Antonio Saucedo — drafted a code of administration. According to the Seguin-Saucedo plan, the school would have a maximum enrollment of seventy students, of whom five from impoverished families would be admitted tuition-free upon discretion of the teacher. The remaining sixty-five slots were to be divided into groups, or classes, based on parents' ability to pay. The first group was assessed a monthly fee of one peso; the second group, four *reales*. The plan advocated a rudimentary form of individualized instruction in that a student might be promoted from the basic class to the advanced group. The method of tuition, however, remained unchanged. The teacher, if qualified, was to be paid a salary of thirty pesos a month. In order to ensure accountability, one of the *alcaldes* of the town council, assisted by four other municipal officials, was to have charge of the school fund, while another city agent had the responsibility of visiting the school daily to observe instructional procedures and to report infractions of the rules. The students were to provide their own books, tablets, and desks or benches.¹⁹ Comprehensive as the Seguin-Saucedo plan appeared on paper, throughout the few remaining years of Spanish administration, education in Texas floundered, mainly because it was not based upon a stable method of financial support. All the same, the design for a San Antonio school, elaborate by frontier standards, indicated that the principal residents, even with a deficiency in local funds, recognized the value of education.

In the Mexican period, the national Constitution of 1824 delegated responsibility for public instruction to the state government. Accordingly, the state constitution of Coahuila y Texas, promulgated in March 1827, authorized the towns of sizeable population to establish elementary schools and seminaries. The following year, the first primary school opened in

San Antonio. In line with the new plan, the town, with an aggregate population of 1,425 souls, had the obligation of providing financial assistance through municipal taxes and private donations.²⁰ Although sanctioned by state law and town ordinances, education in San Antonio had its difficult moments after getting started in 1828.

The school's daily schedule and the curricular and extra-curricular duties of the teacher often provided insight into social conditions. During the summer — more precisely from April to October — the school day was long. Classes began at six in the morning and extended until eleven. After lunch, and possibly home chores and a nap, the students returned to school at two in the afternoon and stayed until six in the evening. In the winter months, the morning schedule was adjusted from seven to twelve, but the afternoon session remained unaltered. The schedule provided for a recess period at nine o'clock, at which time the students ate breakfast. The morning exercises centered upon three questions on religion which formed the basis of a memorization drill. In the afternoon, the students repeated the exercise. During the last hour of both morning and afternoon sessions, the teacher assessed the students' oral recitations. On the last Saturday of each month, the teacher supervised a contest among the students in the basic skills of reading and penmanship. On all other Saturdays, mostly in the afternoon, the more advanced students competed in short memory lessons in Spanish grammar and questions on Christian doctrine. The teacher's duties, aside from classroom routine, included supervising and correcting the pupils' conduct and speech in public, especially towards the elders in the community. On all Fridays and Sundays during Lent, the teacher escorted the class to church, as well as during other days of religious obligation.²¹

Although a broad-based tax system for the support of public education in San Antonio failed to materialize, the local school operated continuously for seven years until the eve of Texan independence. The schoolmasters who pioneered the educational effort in Bexar were Jose Antonio Gama y Fonseca (January 1828-October 1829), Victoriano Zepeda (January 1830), Francisco Rojo (January-July 1831), Juan Francisco Buchetti (1831-1832), and Bruno Huizar (1833-1834).

The Mexican system of education in Texas was not a failure, but simply a beginning. What was significant was that a frontier society, confronted by poverty and a bankrupt state treasury, overcame basic handicaps and provided the means, albeit limited, to open the first public school in San Antonio. Inadequate financing, however, was not the only problem. Indian attacks, epidemics, and political insecurity compounded the difficulty. Even more, the town council was unable to find a qualified instructor who would stay long enough to acquire proficiency in the art of teaching and to give direction to the task of expanding the program through the acquisition of books and supplies. All the same, the San Antonio experience provided a useful foundation.²³

Indicative of the value Mexican-Texan society placed on elementary education, despite previous omissions, Jose Antonio Navarro and Juan N. Seguin, congressmen of the Republic of Texas, introduced a resolution advocating the establishment of a preparatory school and a liberal arts university. Confident that the state would assist public higher education, Seguin and Navarro proposed an endowment of four leagues of land (17,712 acres). Regrettably, the Texas Congress failed to adopt the laudable resolution.²⁴ Even so, it is noteworthy that two Mexican Texans had the foresight to initiate the proposal. Obviously, their ideas on education originated in an earlier era.

An excellent reference to social conditions in Mexican Texas are the ordinances of the *ayuntamiento* of San Antonio. The full gamut of legislation for the year 1829, aside from administration, included the regulation of public health, beautification of the community, and taxation. The section regarding public health specified:

SECOND: It shall be the duty of the citizens whose property borders the acequia, and especially that [of the] city attorney to guard that no dead animals, pelts, or any other type of corruptible refuse be cast into the acequia ...

THIRD: It shall be the duty of the city attorney that the streets, plaza, and all other public parks, be kept clean of all trash, rocks, small carts, lumber, and anything else that might impede traffic or soil their appearance. It shall also be his duty to see that owners of homes next to these streets and plazas wash and sweep the front area of their homes at least on Saturdays of each week.²⁵

The ordinances were quite clear on the matter of physicians and allied health services:

FIFTH: It shall be the duty of the chief of police, or in his absence, that of the *alcalde* to see that any citizens of the country or foreigner who wishes to practice medicine in the community immediately [to] come before proper authority and present those documents that indicate his training in the medical profession. Furthermore, it shall be the duty of those in authority to inspect, each year at least, the medicines that are sold to the public. They shall also inspect doctors, pharmacists, and all those involved in the medical profession and whose responsibility it is to administer these medicines and introduce new ones.²⁶

On the question of beautification projects, the city government had the responsibility of encouraging

those having residence along the banks of the river, aqueducts, and creeks, as well as those living next to the city plaza to plant all types of shade trees provided they do not cause damage and are in keeping with the recommendations of the municipal government.²⁷

Complete and innovative as the city ordinances of 1829 appeared at first glance, in many categories they were extensions of Spanish regulations of an earlier period,²⁸ suggesting that the warp and the weft threads had interlaced.

Perhaps the most significant political decision that affected Mexican-Texan society in the formative years was the creation of the dual state of Coahuila y Texas. The national Constitution of 1824 reduced Texas to an administrative unit called the Department of Bexar. By legislative action, the capital was transferred from San Antonio to Saltillo. With a stroke of a pen, the city lost power and prestige. Fortunately, it kept the archives.

The downgrading of Texas to departmental status also meant the loss of the governorship. To take its place, the legislature authorized the office of *jefe político*. Gradually the new post assumed regional importance in that all municipal and suburban affairs required its approval. After 1832, other municipalities — such as Goliad, Nacogdoches, and San Felipe de Austin — received departmental rank and soon followed the leadership of a *jefe político*.

The social fabric in Mexican Texas included more than *municipios* and *jefes políticos*, although these institutions and others constituted strong warps and wefts. In terms of land distribution, both institutions played leading roles in the registration of property. Mexico's system of land law and distribution required the use of *varas* (33 1/3 inches), *labores* (177 acres), and *leguas* (4,428 acres). After Texan independence in 1836, the Mexican system of land measurement and management remained intact, indicating a willingness of people, ethnicity notwithstanding, to accept a workable method. During the Spanish colonial period and the early years of Mexican nationhood, it is estimated that over twenty-six million acres of land were distributed, all of which contained descriptions in *varas*, *labores*, or *leguas*.

The pattern of land distribution for livestock raising along the Gulf plains and in the southern ranches signified that Mexican-Texan society had adapted a realistic approach to land tenure. Cattle required extensive acreage if ranching was to be productive. Accordingly, the government, in approving sizeable grants in a semi-arid region, underscored the fact that political decisions often matched geographic realities.

The Mexican *rancheros* of south Texas laid the foundation for the range cattle industry. These frontiersmen received land grants (called *porciones*) which extended in either direction from the Rio Grande. In the Rio Grande-Rio Nueces watershed, they acquired the skills, the confidence, and the vocabulary with which to manage cattle successfully on horseback. After 1836, the land south of the Nueces provided the breeding stock for the later development of the cattle industry north of San Antonio.²⁹

The success of the Mexican independence movement in 1821 altered the allegiance of the people from a government based in Madrid to one centered in Mexico City. To the Tejanos of the borderland, the transfer of sovereignty was virtually a painless experience, because for three cen-

turies they had become conditioned in their collective memory to look upon Mexico City as a symbol of central authority as well as a fountain-head of Spanish culture in North America.

Aside from the loss of imperial control, after 1821 Hispanidad continued to exert profound influence in Mexico and the borderlands: the language remained intact; the place-name geography survived; the one-time provinces became states with many of the old names and some new ones; the administration perpetuated tradition; religious doctrine remained untampered; and the national history became intermingled with the colonial antecedents. For the social fabric of the *Tejano* borderland, the warps and wefts of Spain and Mexico were interlaced deftly.

NOTES

¹Felix D. Almaraz, Jr., "The Historical Legacy of Spain and Mexico in Texas: Some Reflections by a Mexican American Historian," lecture delivered at Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, February 18, 1972.

²Virgil N. Lott and Mercurio Martinez, *The Kingdom of Zapata* (San Antonio, 1953), pp. 22, 51.

³*The Handbook of Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin, 1952), II, p. 950.

⁴Roy Grimes, "The Road to Independence," in Roy Grimes, ed., *300 Years in Victoria County* (Victoria, 1968), p. 64.

⁵Agnes G. Grimm, *Llanos Mestenas: Mustang Plains* (Waco, 1968), p. 27.

⁶William H. Oberste, *Texas Irish Empresarios and Their Colonies. Power and Hewetson; McMullen & McGloin* (Austin, 1953), p. 121.

⁷William Bollaert, *William Bollaert's Texas*, edited by W. Eugene Hollan and Ruth Lapham Butler (Norman, 1956), p. 212.

⁸Antonio Martinez to the Commandant General, Letter 242, Bexar, April 25, 1818, in *The Letters of Antonio Martinez, Last Spanish Governor of Texas, 1817-1822*, trans. and edited by Virginia H. Taylor (Austin, 1957), p. 120.

⁹Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, *The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863*, 8 vols. (Austin, 1939-1943), IV, pp. 125n-126n.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Austin to James E.B. Austin, Mexico City, December 26, 1822, in *The Austin Papers*, edited by Eugene C. Barker, 2 vols. (Washington, 1919-1928), I, Part 1, p. 561.

¹²*Writings of Sam Houston*, p. 126n.

¹³J.M. Rodriguez, *Rodriguez Memoirs of Early Texas* (San Antonio, 1961), p. 40.

¹⁴Frederick C. Chabot, *With the Makers of San Antonio* (San Antonio, 1937), p. 127.

¹⁵Houston to E.D. White, Houston, Texas, October 31, 1837; *Writings of Sam Houston*, II, p. 147.

¹⁶Houston to Erasmo Seguin, Houston, Texas, July 6, 1842, *Writings of Sam Houston*, IV, p. 125.

¹⁷*Handbook of Texas*, I, p. 706.

¹⁸Carlos E. Castaneda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*, 7 vols. (Austin, 1936-1958), V, p. 412.

¹⁹I.J. Cox, "Educational Efforts in San Fernando de Bexar," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 6 (July 1902), pp. 30-32.

²⁰James D. Carter, ed., and Virginia H. Taylor, trans., "Notes and Documents: The First Free Public School in Texas, 1828, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 58 (October 1954), p. 289.

²¹Cox, "Educational Efforts in San Fernando de Bexar," pp. 44-45.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 45-57.

²³Max Berger, "Education in Texas during the Spanish and Mexican Periods," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 51 (July 1947), pp. 52-53.

²⁴Ray F. Broussard, *San Antonio During the Republic. A City in Transition*, *Southwestern Studies*, Vol. V, No. 2, Monograph No. 18 (El Paso, 1967), p. 24.

²⁵"The City Ordinances for the Internal Management and Administration of the Municipal Government of San Antonio de Bexar, 1829," (trans. and ed. by Gilbert Ralph Cruz), *Texana*, 7, (Summer, 1969), p. 105.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁸Felix D. Almaraz, Jr., *Tragic Cavalier. Governor Manuel Salcedo of Texas, 1808-1813* (Austin, 1971), p. 16.

²⁹Almaraz, "Historical Legacy of Spain and Mexico in Texas," SWTSU lecture, February 18, 1972.